

REMARKS

The above amendments to the claims have been made to remove the multiple dependencies and otherwise place the claims in better form for initial examination and no substantive change in the scope thereof is intended. Additionally, a substitute specification is appended hereto and is requested to be used in place of the translated German language text. Furthermore, a mark-up copy of the substitute specification is also appended hereto and from which the Examiner can confirm that no new matter has been added to the substitute specification.

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METHOD AND APPARATUS FOR THE NON-DESTRUCTIVE
AND CONTACTLESS DETECTION OF FAULTS IN A
TEST PIECE WHICH IS MOVED RELATIVE TO A PROBE

Background of the Invention

Field of the Invention

[0001] The present invention relates to a method and an apparatus for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults, particularly by means of eddy currents, in a test specimen which is moved relative to a probe that is characterized by an effective width.

Description of Related Art

[0002] A conventional measurement method for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults in a test specimen, in particular a metal semifinished product, is to induce and measure eddy currents in the test specimen. In this case, periodic electromagnetic alternating fields are applied to the test specimen using a transmission coil which is energized sinusoidally. The eddy currents which are thereby induced in the test specimen, in turn, induce a periodic electrical signal in a coil arrangement which is used as a probe and can have an individual coil ("absolute coil") or two coils which are connected subtractively ("differential coil"), the electrical signal having a carrier oscillation corresponding to the transmitter carrier frequency, the amplitude and/or phase of which is/are modulated in a characteristic manner as a result of a fault in the test specimen if a fault reaches the sensitive region of the probe, i.e., the effective width of the probe. In order to scan the test specimen, the test specimen is usually moved linearly with respect to the probe, but arrangements having a rotating probe are also known. The signal detected by the probe is usually demodulated in an analog manner, for example, using synchronous demodulation, and is then evaluated in order to detect faults in the test specimen. In this case, the signal is usually digitized only for the evaluation and representation of the fault signal, that is to say after the coil signal has been demodulated.

[0003] Such eddy current measurement methods are relatively complicated and expensive on account of the outlay needed for the analog demodulation. It must also be taken into account that, for different relative speeds between the test specimen and the probe, that is to say in the case of different output rates and test speeds, different sets of filters are usually required for the demodulated signal, thus entailing additional outlay in the case of a variable test specimen speed.

[0004] U.S. Patent 5,175,498 describes an eddy current measurement method in which even the measurement signal which has been picked up by the coil probe is digitized using a triggerable A/D converter and is then filtered in digital form using Fourier transformation. Triggering of the A/D converter, i.e., the sampling rate, is controlled as a function of the forward feed speed (detected using an encoder) of the test specimen in order to avoid errors (which result from the test specimen being moved backward) when evaluating the signal.

[0005] U.S. Patent 4,445,088 describes a stray magnetic flux measurement method in which a metal test specimen is moved relative to a probe, the measurement signal detected by the probe being digitized using a triggerable A/D converter after said signal has passed through a bandpass filter, and triggering of the converter, i.e., the sampling rate, being controlled by the forward feed speed (detected using a speed sensor) of the test specimen. In order to detect faults, the amplitude of the digitized signal is evaluated in order to determine whether it has exceeded a threshold value, the selection of the sampling rate as a function of the testing speed being used to achieve a prescribed measurement accuracy that is independent of the test specimen speed.

Summary of the Invention

[0006] It is an object of the present invention to provide a particularly simple method for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults in a moving test specimen, in which method a probe is used to detect a periodic electrical signal whose amplitude and/or phase is/are modulated as a result of faults in the test specimen. The intention is also to provide an apparatus which is suitable for carrying out such a method.

[0007] According to the invention, this object is achieved by the A/D converter stage being triggered at an n th integer fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation, n being selected as a function of the fault frequency which is obtained as the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and the effective width of the probe, and the frequency-selective second filter unit being adjusted as a function of the fault frequency.

[0008] One fundamental aspect of the present invention is that the probe signal is sampled, i.e., digitized, at an integer fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation, i.e., the carrier oscillation is undersampled.

[0009] This eliminates the carrier oscillation from the measurement signal, as a result of which the otherwise customary demodulation of the measurement signal is dispensed with and it is thus possible to considerably simplify the method and to considerably reduce the outlay for demodulation, for example, analog synchronous demodulation, which is otherwise required, thus resulting in considerable cost savings and, if appropriate, also in savings in installation space.

[0010] Undersampling also makes it possible to use A/D converters which have a very high resolution and are usually relatively slow, i.e., their maximum sampling rate is relatively restricted.

[0011] In addition, undersampling results in the useful signal being obtained at a relatively slow data rate, thus in turn, facilitating representation of the useful signal, with the result that standard bus systems and possibly radio bus systems can be used, for example, which would not be possible at high data rates or would be possible only after data compression.

[0012] Undersampling also allows the measurement method to be carried out with a relatively low power consumption, in which case the transmitter could be switched off, even during intervals of time in which no sampling is being effected, if sampling is effected, for example, only during every tenth period of the carrier oscillation or even more rarely. This aspect is particularly important for portable devices during battery operation or if a cableless (i.e., wirelessly connected to the evaluation unit) probe is to be used.

[0013] Finally, reduced (in comparison with quasi-continuous sampling) susceptibility to nonperiodic interference signals may result during undersampling since such

interference signals are not perceived at all in the useful signal provided that they do not occur in the respective sampling period, whereas all of the interference signals are reflected in the useful signal in the case of quasi-continuous sampling.

[0014] In accordance with another fundamental aspect of the invention, the sampling rate, i.e., the degree of undersampling, is selected as a function of the so-called fault frequency, that is to say the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and the effective width of the probe.

[0015] Since the duration of the useful signal caused by a fault, and thus, the fault frequency, essentially depend only on the extent of the sensitive region of the probe, i.e., the effective width, and on the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe, it can be ensured in this manner, on the one hand, that the accuracy with which the useful signal is represented does not depend on the speed of the test specimen (it can be ensured, by appropriately selecting the sampling rate, that approximately the same number of sampling points always occur in each fault signal) and it can be ensured, on the other hand, that the fault signal of a particular fault essentially looks the same irrespective of the speed of the test specimen, thus greatly simplifying detection of the fault.

[0016] Another advantage of undersampling that is matched to the speed resides in the fact that, in this manner, the digital filter unit which is used to filter the digital measurement signal provided by the A/D converter stage in order to obtain an interference-free useful signal can be adjusted in a very simple manner as a function of the fault frequency, namely by clocking the digital filter at the sampling rate (in the case of a digital filter, the cut-off frequency depends directly on the clock rate). This makes it possible to use one single set of filters whose cut-off frequencies are automatically matched to the bandwidth (which is dependent on the test specimen speed) of the fault signal by appropriately selecting the sampling rate, i.e., the clock rate.

[0017] The so-called fault frequency usually corresponds to the maximum of the fault spectrum, i.e., the frequency with the highest intensity. The fault bandwidth is the frequency range around the fault frequency in which information that is still decisive for detecting faults or representing faults can be found. The effective width of the probe depends, on the one hand, on the geometric configuration of the probe but also on the boundary conditions for use

of the probe, for example, the distance between the probe and the test specimen (filling factor), the frequency of the carrier oscillation, the material of the test specimen etc. Physically, the effective width corresponds to the length which corresponds to the reciprocal of the fault frequency and is obtained from the test specimen speed divided by twice the fault frequency. The effective width thus specifies the length over which a particular (fault) location in the test specimen can influence the measurement signal picked up by the probe.

[0018] The invention preferably uses the measurement of eddy currents in the test specimen, that is to say the transmitter is a coil to which a radiofrequency AC voltage, preferably in the frequency range from 1 kHz to 5 MHz, is applied in order to induce eddy currents in the test specimen, the probe being a coil arrangement in which the eddy currents induce the periodic signal. In this case, the probe is preferably in the form of a differential coil.

[0019] Alternatively, however, the invention may also be based on a so-called EMAT (Electromagnetic Acoustic Transducer) method, the transmitter using electromagnetic excitation to generate sound waves in the test specimen, and the probe detecting sound waves in the test specimen and converting them into the periodic electrical signal.

[0020] In another variant, the invention may use microwave measurement, the transmitter radiating microwaves into the test specimen, and the probe converting microwaves into the periodic electrical signal.

[0021] The relative movement between the test specimen and the probe preferably results from the test specimen being moved linearly with respect to the probe. In principle, however, the relative movement between the test specimen and the probe may also result from the probe rotating with respect to the test specimen.

[0022] The AC voltage for the transmitter may be generated from a binary signal by means of curve shaping, the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage preferably being generated by the frequency of the binary signal that is used to generate the transmitter AC voltage being divided by an integer. The integer by which the frequency of the carrier oscillation is divided in order to trigger the A/D converter stage is preferably selected to be inversely proportional to the fault frequency so that the sampling rate selected may be selected to be at least approximately proportional to the fault frequency. This integer is

preferably selected in such a manner that at least 5, preferably at least 20, but at most 100, preferably at most 50, sampling operations are effected by the A/D converter stage in a fault interval, i.e., an interval of time which corresponds to the inverse of the fault frequency.

[0023] As already mentioned, the frequency-selective second filter unit may be automatically adjusted as a function of the fault frequency by the second filter unit being clocked at the sampling rate for each A/D converter stage since, in the case of a digital filter, the cut-off frequency is directly proportional to the clock frequency. The second filter unit expediently has a low-pass filter in order to remove components outside the fault bandwidth and a high-pass filter in order to remove DC components of the digital signal. The cut-off frequency of the low-pass filter is expediently higher than the fault frequency, preferably higher than twice the fault frequency, while the cut-off frequency of the high-pass filter is less than the fault frequency, preferably less than a quarter of the fault frequency. Since the preferred cut-off frequencies of the second filter unit depend directly on the fault frequency, it is possible, by virtue of the sampling rate of the signal likewise being selected as a function of the fault frequency and the second filter unit being clocked at this sampling rate, to automatically optimally match the cut-off frequencies of the filter unit to the fault frequency, i.e., the test specimen speed and the effective width of the probe, in a particularly simple manner. In principle, the cut-off frequencies may be closer to the fault frequency than in conventional methods since, as a result of the filters being accurately tracked with respect to the fault frequency, i.e., the test specimen speed, in particular, the risk of the filters cutting off fault information is reduced.

[0024] The frequency of the carrier oscillation is preferably selected in such a manner that it is at least ten times, better still at least twenty times, the fault frequency since the ability to reproduce a fault (i.e., the ability to reproduce a fault signal that is typical of a particular fault) may otherwise be impaired, which would make it more difficult to detect faults.

[0025] Although solutions are also possible, in principle, in which only one individual value is detected for each full cycle sampled, in which case it would then be necessary to determine the phase angle indirectly, two values with a fixed phase offset are preferably obtained for each full cycle sampled, this preferably being carried out using two A/D

converters, i.e., the converter stage has two A/D converters which are connected in parallel and are triggered at the same frequency in such a way that they sample in a manner offset by a fixed phase difference, the phase difference preferably being 90° or an integer multiple of 360° plus 90° (however, the phase difference need not necessarily be exactly 90° but rather could be between 85° and 95° , for example). Such phase-offset sampling can be used to ensure that, despite the undersampling, the maximum amount of signal information is obtained, and the digital measurement signal is obtained in the form of a two-component signal, i.e., with phase and amplitude information, thus improving the detection of faults. In this case, it is expedient for the two components of the digital measurement signal provided by the A/D converter stage equipped with two A/D converters to be filtered separately using the second filter unit in order to obtain the useful signal in the form of a two-component signal, the two components then being able to be taken into account when evaluating the useful signal.

[0026] In order to carry out such phase-offset sampling, it is not necessarily required to use precisely two A/D converters. Instead of this, it would also be possible to use only a single A/D converter which is sufficiently fast and carries out the two sampling operations, i.e., that at 0° and that at 90° , these two sample values then being processed further separately, as when using two A/D converters, in order to achieve two-component signal evaluation. It would be possible to use very slow A/D converters if, for example, use is made of 4, 8 or 16, etc. A/D converters which do not become active upon each trigger pulse that is applied to the A/D converter stage but rather only become active upon every 2nd, 4th or 8th etc. trigger pulse, i.e., the sampling work for each of the two phase angles is respectively appropriately divided, in terms of time, between a plurality of A/D converters.

[0027] The A/D converter stage preferably has a resolution of at least 16 bits, use preferably being made of flash converters or SAR converters.

[0028] The application, i.e., the radiation, of the electromagnetic alternating fields to the test specimen using the transmitter may, in principle, be interrupted at least for part of each interval between two successive trigger signals for the A/D converter stage since signals are not detected, i.e., sampled, anyway in this time (depending on the specific situation, these sampling pauses may, under certain circumstances, extend over a large number of periods of

the carrier oscillation). This makes it possible, particularly in the case of portable measuring devices, to considerably save on power consumption, thus making it possible, for example, to considerably reduce the dimensions and weight of the power supply elements. In a similar manner, on the signal detection side, the electronics, i.e., the signal processing processor, in particular, may also be shut down in the interval between two sampling operations in order to save power.

[0029] The first filter unit preferably has a low-pass filter which acts as an aliasing filter as regards the sampling by the A/D converter stage, a high-pass filter also preferably being provided in order to remove low-frequency interference signals. The first filter unit is usually in the form of an analog filter. A controllable amplifier is preferably also provided downstream of the first filter unit in order to change the filter signal to the amplitude that is optimally suited to the A/D converter stage.

[0030] The speed of the test specimen is preferably determined by means of measurement, for example, using an encoder. If it is not absolutely necessary to measure the testing speed because, for example, it is known anyway with sufficient accuracy at any measurement time, the speed may also be firmly prescribed as a parameter.

[0031] A digital signal processor which preferably also forms the second filter unit is preferably used to control the A/D converter stage, i.e., the selection of the trigger times, and to process the digital signal provided by the A/D converter stage. The drive device for triggering the A/D converter stage preferably has a source (which may be formed by a timer) for a binary signal and a divider which is used to divide the binary signal by an integer in order to generate the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage, the binary signal being processed by a curve shaper in order to provide the supply voltage for the transmitter. The timer may be part of the digital signal processor or may be separate therefrom. The divider is preferably separate from the signal processor and is in the form of a PAL (Programmable Array Logic) module.

[0032] The invention will be explained, by way of example, in more detail below with reference to the accompanying drawings.

Brief Description of the Drawings

[0033] Fig. 1 schematically shows one example of an embodiment of an eddy current measuring apparatus according to the present invention; and

[0034] Fig. 2 schematically shows one example of the profile of a probe signal during digital sampling.

Detailed Description of the Invention

[0035] Fig. 1 shows one example of the design of an eddy current measuring apparatus according to the invention. In this case, a test specimen 13, which is in the form of an industrial semifinished product, for example, a slab, is moved linearly past a test station 11 at a variable speed v is tested, the speed being detected by means of a speed sensor 17 which, for example, can emit a signal that is essentially proportional to the speed v . In this case, the signal may be, for example, a square-wave signal which, for example, contains one pulse for every 5 mm of forward feed of the test specimen 13.

[0036] The test station 11 has a transmitter in the form of a transmission coil 12 and a probe in the form of a reception coil 14. The transmission coil 12 is used to induce eddy currents in the test specimen 13 by means of an electromagnetic alternating field at at least one prescribed carrier frequency; the eddy currents, in turn, inducing an AC voltage in the reception coil 14 which acts as a probe signal and has a carrier oscillation at the carrier frequency of the transmission coil 12. The amplitude and the phase of the probe signal is modulated as a result of a fault 15 if the fault 15 reaches the effective width WB of the reception coil 14. The reception coil 14 is preferably in the form of a differential coil, that is to say, in the form of a coil which has two windings (which are wound in opposite directions) and reacts only to changes in the electrical properties of the test specimen on account of the presence of a fault 15. Differential coils are suited, in particular, to detecting sudden changes in the test specimen 13. However, instead, an absolute coil could also be used as the reception coil 14, the absolute coil comprising a plurality of windings which are wound in the same direction and being suited, in particular, to detecting long homogeneous changes in the test specimen 13.

[0037] The voltage for the transmission coil 12 may be generated, for example, by a binary signal which is generated by a timer unit 44 being supplied as a predefined frequency to a generator 48 which uses that frequency to generate a square-wave signal or else a sinusoidal signal which passes through a curve shaper 40 and is then amplified by means of a power amplifier 42 before it is supplied to the transmission coil 12. The signal preferably has a sinusoidal waveform, and in the simplest case, contains only a single carrier frequency. However, measurements involving a plurality of carrier frequencies at the same time and/or carrier signals which differ considerably from sinusoidal oscillations are also possible, in principle. The carrier frequency is typically in the range from 1 kHz to 5 MHz.

[0038] The probe signal picked up by the reception coil 14 passes through a bandpass filter 18 and an adjustable preamplifier 16 before it is supplied to an A/D converter stage 35. The bandpass filter 18 is used, on the one hand, by means of the low-pass filter, as an anti-aliasing filter as regards the digitization of the signal by the A/D converter stage 35, and is used, on the other hand, by means of the high-pass filter, to remove low-frequency interference signals. The adjustable preamplifier 16 is used to change the amplitude of the analog probe signal to the amplitude which is optimally suited to the A/D converter stage 35.

[0039] The A/D converter stage 35 has two A/D converters 32, 34 which are connected in parallel and should have a high resolution, but at least a resolution of 16 bits, preferably at least 22 bits, and should preferably be able to carry out at least 500 A/D conversions per second. The A/D converters 32, 34 are preferably in the form of flash converters or SAR (Successive Approximation Register) converters.

[0040] The A/D converter stage 35 is triggered by a drive device 37 which has the timer unit 44, the cosine generator 48, a sine generator 46 which is arranged parallel to the sine generator 46, and a frequency divider 30. The signal which is generated by the cosine generator 48 (which is at the frequency of the carrier frequency of the supply signal for the transmission coil 12) and the signal from the sine generator 46 (which corresponds to the signal from the cosine generator 48 but has been phase-shifted through 90° with respect to the signal from the cosine generator 48) are present at the input of the frequency divider 30. In the frequency divider 30, the frequency of these two signals is divided by an integer n .

[0041] The corresponding output signal whose frequency has been reduced is used to trigger the A/D converter 32 or the A/D converter 34. The number n for the divider 30 is selected by a digital signal processor 40 as a function of the fault frequency, i.e., the quotient of the instantaneous test specimen speed v and the effective width WB of the reception coil 14. The value of n is preferably selected to be inversely proportional to the fault frequency so that the trigger rate of the A/D converter stage 35 is at least approximately proportional to the fault frequency. In this manner, if the effective width WB is assumed to be constant to a first approximation and if the test specimen speed v is higher, and thus, the fault frequency is higher, the analog probe signal is correspondingly sampled more frequently.

[0042] The divider 30 is preferably in the form of a so-called PAL (Programmable Array Logic) module in order to ensure that the trigger signals arrive at the A/D converter stage 35 in a manner such that they have been delayed as little as possible (i.e., synchronously) with respect to the output signal from the cosine generator 48 and from the sine generator 46 and have no phase jitter.

[0043] On account of the corresponding phase shift between the two input signals for the divider 30, the two A/D converters 32, 34 are also triggered with a fixed phase offset of 90° . This makes it possible for the analog probe signal to be evaluated in two components, i.e., both in terms of amplitude and phase. It goes without saying that the phase delay between the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage 35 and the signal from the transmission coil 12 should be as short as possible, in which case so-called phase jitter, in particular, should also be avoided, i.e., the phase relationships should be as precisely constant as possible in terms of time.

[0044] The drive device 37 shown is used to ensure that the analog probe signal is sampled at most once per full cycle of the carrier oscillation by each A/D converter 32, 34 (in this case, n is equal to 1). However, depending on the instantaneous fault frequency, that is to say the test specimen speed v , n may become considerably larger than 1, with the result that only one sampling operation is carried out at all during every n th full cycle of the carrier oscillation.

[0045] Fig. 2 shows an example in which n is equal to 2, i.e., each A/D converter 32, 34 carries out one respective sampling operation A_n , B_n only during every second full cycle.

[0046] Since, however, in all cases, sampling is carried out at most once per full cycle for each A/D converter 32, 34, this undersampling results in the frequency of the carrier oscillation, i.e., the carrier frequency, being eliminated from the digital signal, i.e., undersampling is used to demodulate the analog probe signal.

[0047] The value of n is preferably selected in such a manner that at least 5, preferably at least 20, sampling operations are carried out by each A/D converter 32, 34 in the interval of time in which a significant fault signal is observed, that is to say in the interval of time in which a point of the fault 15 moves through the effective width WB of the reception coil 14, that is to say in the interval of time which essentially corresponds to the inverse of the fault frequency, in order to obtain the information contained in the fault signal in a manner which still suffices for reliable fault detection. However, no more than 50, and at most 100, sampling operations will generally be necessary during such an interval of time.

[0048] The frequency of the carrier oscillation should be selected in such a manner that it is at least ten times the fault frequency since the fault signal will otherwise be carried by too few full cycles of the carrier oscillation and the ability to reproduce the fault will become problematical. If, on account of other boundary conditions, the carrier frequency cannot be selected to be high enough, fault detection can be improved by synchronously sampling once in each first half-cycle and in each second half-cycle, the value from the second half-cycle being inverted and then being processed further like the value from the first half-cycle (on account of the inversion, this still constitutes undersampling as regards the carrier frequency).

[0049] The demodulated digital two-channel output signal from the A/D converter stage 35 passes through a digital bandpass filter 52 which can be represented by the signal processor 40 and is used to remove interference signals which are outside the bandwidth of the fault signal. For this purpose, the cut-off frequency of the high-pass filter is preferably selected in such a manner that it is less than one quarter of the fault frequency, while the cut-off frequency of the low-pass filter is preferably selected in such a manner that it is at least

twice the fault frequency in order to avoid removing signal components which still contain information regarding the fault.

[0050] The digital bandpass filter 52 is clocked at the sampling rate of the A/D converter stage 35, i.e., the trigger rate, which includes the great advantage that, when the fault frequency is changed, i.e., when the test specimen speed v is changed, the cut-off frequencies of the bandpass filter are automatically entrained with the fault frequency since the cut-off frequencies of a digital bandpass filter are proportional to the clock rate and the clock rate is automatically matched to the change in the fault frequency via the sampling rate which is prescribed by the drive unit 37.

[0051] The information regarding the effective width WB that is needed to determine the fault frequency can be either manually input to the signal processor 40 or it is directly provided by the test station 11, as is described, for example, in EP 0 734 522 B1 and corresponding International Patent Application PCT/EP94/03811 which designates the United States and was published as WO95/169125.

[0052] It goes without saying that the measuring system reacts analogously to a change in the fault frequency, said change being caused by the fact that, although the test specimen speed v is kept constant, the reception coil 14 is replaced with another reception coil having a different effective width WB.

[0053] The useful signal obtained after filtering by the digital bandpass filter 52 is evaluated in a manner known per se in an evaluation unit 50 in order to detect and locate faults 15 in the test specimen 13, both the amplitude and the phase information for the fault signal usually being used here.

[0054] In particular, given relatively large values of n , i.e., if only a relatively small number of full cycles of the carrier oscillation are sampled at all, the transmission coil 12 and/or the evaluation electronics, i.e., the signal processor 40, in particular, can, for example, be switched off or put into the quiescent state during the sampling pauses in order to reduce the power consumption, which is important, in particular, for portable measuring devices.

What is claimed is:

1. A method for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults, particularly by means of eddy currents, in a test specimen (13) which is moved, at a speed (v), relative to a probe (14) that is characterized by an effective width (WB),

a transmitter (12) being used to apply periodic electromagnetic alternating fields to the test specimen and the probe being used to detect a periodic electrical signal which has a carrier oscillation whose amplitude and/or phase is/are modulated as a result of a fault (15) in the test specimen if the fault reaches the effective width of the probe,

the probe signal being filtered using a frequency-selective first filter unit (18),

the signal which has been filtered using the first filter unit being sampled by means of a triggerable A/D converter stage (35) in order to obtain a demodulated digital measurement signal,

the digital measurement signal being filtered using a digital frequency-selective adjustable second filter unit (52) in order to obtain a useful signal, and

the useful signal being evaluated in order to detect a fault in the test specimen,

the A/D converter stage being triggered at an nth integer fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation, n being selected as a function of the fault frequency which is obtained as the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and the effective width of the probe, and the frequency-selective second filter unit being adjusted as a function of the fault frequency.

2. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the relative movement between the test specimen (13) and the probe (14) results from the test specimen being moved linearly with respect to the probe.

3. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the relative movement between the test specimen and the probe results from the probe rotating with respect to the test specimen.

4. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the transmitter is a coil (12) to which a radiofrequency AC voltage in the frequency range from 1 kHz to 5 MHz is applied in order to induce eddy currents in the test specimen (13), the probe being a coil arrangement (14) in which the eddy currents induce the periodic signal.

5. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the transmitter (12) is supplied with an AC voltage in order to generate the periodic electromagnetic alternating fields, the AC voltage being generated from a binary signal by curve shaping.

6. The method as claimed in claim 5, characterized in that the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage (35) is generated by dividing the frequency of the binary signal that is used to generate the AC voltage for the transmitter (12) by n .

7. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that n is selected to be inversely proportional to the fault frequency in order to select the trigger rate of the A/D converter stage (35) to be at least approximately proportional to the fault frequency.

8. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that n is selected in such a manner that at least 5, preferably at least 20, sampling operations are carried out by the A/D converter stage (35) in an interval of time which corresponds to the inverse of the fault frequency.

9. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that n is selected in such a manner that at most 100, preferably at most 50, sampling operations are carried out by the A/D converter stage (35) in an interval of time which corresponds to the inverse of the fault frequency.

10. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the frequency-selective second filter unit (52) is automatically adjusted as a function of the fault

frequency by the second filter unit being clocked at the sampling rate of the A/D converter stage (35).

11. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the second filter unit (52) has a low-pass filter in order to remove interference components of the demodulated digital signal at frequencies higher than the fault frequency, the cut-off frequency of the low-pass filter being higher than the fault frequency, preferably higher than twice the fault frequency.

12. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the second filter unit (52) has a high-pass filter in order to remove DC components of the demodulated digital signal, the cut-off frequency of the high-pass filter being less than the fault frequency, preferably less than a quarter of the fault frequency.

13. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the frequency of the carrier oscillation is selected in such a manner that it is at least ten times the fault frequency.

14. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that, when it is triggered, the A/D converter stage (35) samples two values, in a manner offset by a fixed phase difference, in order to obtain the digital measurement signal in the form of a two-component signal.

15. The method as claimed in claim 14, characterized in that the phase difference is 90° or $m * 360^\circ + 90^\circ$, where m is an integer.

16. The method as claimed in claim 14 or 15, characterized in that the two components of the digital measurement signal which is provided by the A/D converter stage (35) are filtered separately using the second filter unit (52) in order to obtain the useful signal in the form of a two-component signal.

17. The method as claimed in claim 16, characterized in that the two components are taken into account when evaluating the useful signal.

18. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the application of the electromagnetic alternating fields to the test specimen (13) using the transmitter (12) is interrupted at least for part of each interval between two successive trigger signals for the A/D converter stage (35).

19. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the first filter unit (18) has at least one low-pass filter which acts as an aliasing filter as regards the sampling by the A/D converter stage (35).

20. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the first filter unit (18) has a high-pass filter in order to remove low-frequency interference signals.

21. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the speed (v) of the test specimen (13) is determined by means of measurement or is firmly prescribed as a parameter.

22. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that a controllable amplifier (16) is connected upstream of the A/D converter stage (35) in order to change the signal to the amplitude which is optimally suited to the A/D converter stage.

23. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the transmitter uses electromagnetic excitation to generate sound waves in the test specimen, and the probe detects sound waves in the test specimen and converts them into the periodic electrical signal.

24. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the transmitter radiates microwaves into the test specimen, and the probe converts microwaves into the periodic electrical signal.

25. An apparatus for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults (15), particularly by means of eddy currents, in a test specimen (13) which is moved, at a speed (v), relative to a probe (14) that is characterized by an effective width (WB), said apparatus having

- a device (17) for detecting the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe,
- a transmitter (12) for applying periodic electromagnetic alternating fields to the test specimen,

- the probe for detecting a periodic electrical signal which has a carrier oscillation whose amplitude and/or phase is/are modulated as a result of a fault in the test specimen if the fault reaches the effective width of the probe,

- a frequency-selective first filter unit (18) for filtering the probe signal,

- a triggerable A/D converter stage (35) for sampling the signal which has been filtered using the first filter unit in order to obtain a demodulated digital measurement signal,

- a drive device (37) for triggering the A/D converter stage at an nth integer fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation, n being selected as a function of the fault frequency which is obtained as the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and the effective width of the probe,

- a digital frequency-selective second filter unit (52) which can be adjusted as a function of the fault frequency and is intended to filter the digital measurement signal for the purpose of obtaining a useful signal, and

- an evaluation unit (50) for evaluating the useful signal for the purpose of detecting a fault in the test specimen.

26. The apparatus as claimed in claim 25, characterized in that the probe (14) is in the form of a differential coil or an absolute coil for measuring eddy currents.

27. The apparatus as claimed in either of claims 25 and 26, characterized in that a binary signal source (44, 48) and a curve shaper (40) are provided in order to generate a supply voltage signal for the transmitter (12) from a binary signal by means of curve shaping.

28. The apparatus as claimed in claim 27, characterized in that the drive device (37) has a divider (30) in order to generate the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage (35) from the binary signal for the curve shaper (40) by dividing said binary signal by n.

29. The apparatus as claimed in claim 28, characterized in that the binary signal source is in the form of a timer (44).

30. The apparatus as claimed in one of claims 25 to 29, characterized in that the A/D converter stage (35) has a resolution of at least 16 bits.

31. The apparatus as claimed in one of claims 25 to 30, characterized in that the A/D converter stage (35) has at least one flash converter or SAR converter.

32. The apparatus as claimed in one of claims 25 to 31, characterized in that the second filter unit (52) is formed by a digital signal processor (40).

33. The apparatus as claimed in one of claims 25 to 32, characterized in that the A/D converter stage (35) has two A/D converters (32, 34) which are connected in parallel, the two A/D converters being triggered at the same frequency in such a manner that they sample in a manner offset by a fixed phase difference in order to obtain the digital measurement signal in the form of a two-component signal.

Abstract

Method for nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults in a test specimen which is moved relative to a probe that detects a periodic electrical signal having a carrier oscillation whose amplitude and/or phase is/are modulated by any fault in the test specimen. The probe signal is filtered and sampled by a triggerable A/D converter stage to obtain a demodulated digital measurement signal which is filtered using a digital frequency-selective adjustable second filter unit to obtain a useful signal which is evaluated to detect a fault in the test specimen. The A/D converter stage is triggered at a fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation selected as a function of the fault frequency obtained as the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and the effective width of the probe, and the frequency-selective second filter unit is adjusted as a function of the fault frequency.

Mark-up Specification

~~Method and apparatus for the nondestructive and
contact-free detection of faults in a test specimen
which is moved relative to a probe~~
5 METHOD AND APPARATUS
FOR THE NON-DESTRUCTIVE
AND CONTACTLESS DETECTION OF FAULTS IN A
TEST PIECE WHICH IS MOVED RELATIVE TO A PROBE

10 Background of the Invention

Field of the Invention

15 [0001] The present invention relates to a method and an
apparatus for the nondestructive and contact-free
detection of faults, particularly by means of eddy
currents, in a test specimen which is moved relative to
a probe that is characterized by an effective width.

Description of Related Art

20 [0002] A conventional measurement method for the
nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults in
a test specimen, in particular a metal semifinished
product, is to induce and measure eddy currents in the
test specimen. In this case, periodic electromagnetic
25 alternating fields are applied to the test specimen
using a transmission coil which is energized
sinusoidally. The eddy currents which are thereby
induced in the test specimen, in turn, induce a periodic
electrical signal in a coil arrangement which is used
30 as a probe and can have ~~one~~ an individual coil
("absolute coil") or two coils which are connected
subtractively ("differential coil"), ~~said the~~ electrical
signal having a carrier oscillation corresponding to
the transmitter carrier frequency, the amplitude and/or
35 phase of which is/are modulated in a characteristic
manner as a result of a fault in the test specimen if a
fault reaches the sensitive region of the probe, i.e.,
the effective width of the probe. In order to scan the
test specimen, the test specimen is usually moved
40 linearly with respect to the probe, but arrangements
having a rotating probe are also known. The signal
detected by the probe is usually demodulated in an
analog manner, for example, using synchronous
demodulation, and is then evaluated in order to detect
45 faults in the test specimen. In this case, the signal
is usually digitized only for the evaluation and
representation of the fault signal, that is to say
after the coil signal has been demodulated.

5 [0003] Such eddy current measurement methods are relatively complicated and expensive on account of the outlay needed for the analog demodulation. It must also be taken into account that, for different relative speeds between the test specimen and the probe, that is to say in the case of different output rates and test speeds, different sets of filters are usually required for the demodulated signal, thus entailing additional outlay in the case of a variable test specimen speed.

10 US[0004] U.S. Patent 5,175,498 describes an eddy current measurement method in which even the measurement signal which has been picked up by the coil probe is digitized using a triggerable A/D converter and is then
15 ~~demodulated~~ filtered in digital form using Fourier transformation. Triggering of the A/D converter, i.e., the sampling rate, is controlled as a function of the forward feed speed (detected using an encoder) of the test specimen in order to avoid ~~faults~~ errors (which
20 result from the test specimen being moved backward) when evaluating the signal.

US[0005] U.S. Patent 4,445,088 describes a stray magnetic flux measurement method in which a metal test specimen
25 is moved relative to a probe, the measurement signal detected by the probe being digitized using a triggerable A/D converter after said signal has passed through a bandpass filter, and triggering of the converter, i.e., the sampling rate, being controlled by
30 the forward feed speed (detected using a speed sensor) of the test specimen. In order to detect faults, the amplitude of the digitized signal is evaluated in order to determine whether it has exceeded a threshold value, the selection of the sampling rate as a function of the
35 testing speed being used to achieve a prescribed measurement accuracy that is independent of the test specimen speed.

Summary of the Invention

40 [0006] It is an object of the present invention to provide a particularly simple method for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults in a moving test specimen, in which method a probe is used
45 to detect a periodic electrical signal whose amplitude and/or phase is/are modulated as a result of faults in

the test specimen. The intention is also to provide an apparatus which is suitable for carrying out such a method.

- 5 ~~[0007]~~ According to the invention, this object is achieved by means ~~the A/D converter stage being triggered at an nth integer fraction of a method as claimed in claim 1 and by means the frequency of an apparatus the carrier oscillation, n being selected as~~
10 ~~claimed in claim 25, a function of the fault frequency which is obtained as the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and the effective width of the probe, and the frequency-selective second filter unit being adjusted as a function of the fault frequency.~~
- 15 ~~[0008]~~ One fundamental aspect of the present invention is that the probe signal is sampled, i.e., digitized, at an integer fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation, i.e., the carrier oscillation is undersampled.
- 20 ~~[0009]~~ This eliminates the carrier oscillation from the measurement signal, as a result of which the otherwise customary demodulation of the measurement signal is dispensed with and it is thus possible to considerably simplify the method and to considerably reduce the
25 outlay for demodulation, for example, analog synchronous demodulation, which is otherwise required, thus resulting in considerable cost savings and, if appropriate, also in savings in installation space.
- 30 ~~[0010]~~ Undersampling also makes it possible to use A/D converters which have a very high resolution and are usually relatively slow, i.e., their maximum sampling rate is relatively restricted.
- 35 ~~[0011]~~ In addition, undersampling results in the useful signal being obtained at a relatively slow data rate, thus in turn, facilitating representation of the useful signal, with the result that standard bus systems and possibly radio bus systems can be used, for example,
40 which would not be possible at high data rates or would be possible only after data compression.

10012] Undersampling also allows the measurement method to be carried out with a relatively low power consumption, in which case the transmitter could be switched off, even during intervals of time in which no sampling is being effected, if sampling is effected, for example, only during every tenth period of the carrier oscillation or even more rarely. This aspect is particularly important for portable devices during battery operation or if a cableless (i.e., wirelessly connected to the evaluation unit) probe is to be used.

10013] Finally, reduced (in comparison with quasi-continuous sampling) susceptibility to nonperiodic interference signals may result during undersampling since such interference signals are not perceived at all in the useful signal provided that they do not occur in the respective sampling period, whereas all of the interference signals are reflected in the useful signal in the case of quasi-continuous sampling.

10014] In accordance with another fundamental aspect of the invention, the sampling rate, i.e., the degree of undersampling, is selected as a function of the so-called fault frequency, that is to say the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and the effective width of the probe.

10015] Since the duration of the useful signal caused by a fault, and thus, the fault frequency, essentially depend only on the extent of the sensitive region of the probe, i.e., the effective width, and on the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe, it can be ensured in this manner, on the one hand, that the accuracy with which the useful signal is represented does not depend on the speed of the test specimen (it can be ensured, by appropriately selecting the sampling rate, that approximately the same number of sampling points always occur in each fault signal) and it can be ensured, on the other hand, that the fault signal of a particular fault essentially looks the same irrespective of the speed of the test specimen, thus greatly simplifying detection of the fault.

5 [0016] Another advantage of undersampling that is matched
to the speed resides in the fact that, in this manner,
the digital filter unit which is used to filter the
digital measurement signal provided by the A/D
converter stage in order to obtain an interference-free
10 useful signal can be adjusted in a very simple manner
as a function of the fault frequency, namely by
clocking the digital filter at the sampling rate (in
the case of a digital filter, the cut-off frequency
15 depends directly on the clock rate). This makes it
possible to use one single set of filters whose cut-off
frequencies are automatically matched to the bandwidth
(which is dependent on the test specimen speed) of the
fault signal by appropriately selecting the sampling
rate, i.e., the clock rate.

20 [0017] The so-called fault frequency usually corresponds
to the maximum of the fault spectrum, i.e., the
frequency with the highest intensity. The fault
bandwidth is the frequency range around the fault
frequency in which information that is still decisive
for detecting faults or representing faults can be
25 found. The effective width of the probe depends, on the
one hand, on the geometric configuration of the probe
but also on the boundary conditions for use of the
probe, for example, the distance between the probe and
the test specimen (filling factor), the frequency of
the carrier oscillation, the material of the test
specimen etc. Physically, the effective width
30 corresponds to the length which corresponds to the
reciprocal of the fault frequency and is obtained from
the test specimen speed divided by twice the fault
frequency. The effective width thus specifies the
length over which a particular (fault) location in the
35 test specimen can influence the measurement signal
picked up by the probe.

40 [0018] The invention preferably uses the measurement of
eddy currents in the test specimen, that is to say the
transmitter is a coil to which a radiofrequency AC
voltage, preferably in the frequency range from 1 kHz
to 5 MHz, is applied in order to induce eddy currents
in the test specimen, the probe being a coil
45 arrangement in which the eddy currents induce the
periodic signal. In this case, the probe is preferably
in the form of a differential coil.

5 [0019] Alternatively, however, the invention may also be based on a so-called EMAT (Electromagnetic Acoustic Transducer) method, the transmitter using electromagnetic excitation to generate sound waves in the test specimen, and the probe detecting sound waves in the test specimen and converting them into the periodic electrical signal.

10 [0020] In another variant, the invention may use microwave measurement, the transmitter radiating microwaves into the test specimen, and the probe converting microwaves into the periodic electrical signal.

15 [0021] The relative movement between the test specimen and the probe preferably results from the test specimen being moved linearly with respect to the probe. In principle, however, the relative movement between the test specimen and the probe may also result from the probe rotating with respect to the test specimen.

25 [0022] The AC voltage for the transmitter may be generated from a binary signal by means of curve shaping, the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage preferably being generated by the frequency of the binary signal that is used to generate the transmitter AC voltage being divided by an integer. The integer by which the frequency of the carrier oscillation is divided in order to trigger the A/D converter stage is preferably selected to be inversely proportional to the fault frequency so that the sampling rate selected may be selected to be at least approximately proportional to the fault frequency. This integer is preferably selected in such a manner that at least 5, preferably at least 20, but at most 100, preferably at most 50, sampling operations are effected by the A/D converter stage in a fault interval, i.e., an interval of time which corresponds to the inverse of the fault frequency.

45 [0023] As already mentioned, the frequency-selective second filter unit may be automatically adjusted as a function of the fault frequency by the second filter unit being clocked at the sampling rate for each A/D

converter stage since, in the case of a digital filter, the cut-off frequency is directly proportional to the clock frequency. The second filter unit expediently has a low-pass filter in order to remove components outside the fault bandwidth and a high-pass filter in order to remove DC components of the digital signal. The cut-off frequency of the low-pass filter is expediently higher than the fault frequency, preferably higher than twice the fault frequency, while the cut-off frequency of the high-pass filter is less than the fault frequency, preferably less than a quarter of the fault frequency. Since the preferred cut-off frequencies of the second filter unit depend directly on the fault frequency, it is possible, by virtue of the sampling rate of the signal likewise being selected as a function of the fault frequency and the second filter unit being clocked at this sampling rate, to automatically optimally match the cut-off frequencies of the filter unit to the fault frequency, i.e., the test specimen speed and the effective width of the probe, in a particularly simple manner. In principle, the cut-off frequencies may be closer to the fault frequency than in conventional methods since, as a result of the filters being accurately tracked with respect to the fault frequency, i.e., the test specimen speed, in particular, the risk of the filters cutting off fault information is reduced.

100241 The frequency of the carrier oscillation is preferably selected in such a manner that it is at least ten times, better still at least twenty times, the fault frequency since the ability to reproduce a fault (i.e., the ability to reproduce a fault signal that is typical of a particular fault) may otherwise be impaired, which would make it more difficult to detect faults.

100251 Although solutions are also possible, in principle, in which only one individual value is detected for each full cycle sampled, in which case it would then be necessary to determine the phase angle indirectly, two values with a fixed phase offset are preferably obtained for each full cycle sampled, this preferably being carried out using two A/D converters, i.e., the converter stage has two A/D converters which are connected in parallel and are triggered at the same

frequency in such a way that they sample in a manner offset by a fixed phase difference, the phase difference preferably being 90° or an integer multiple of 360° plus 90° (however, the phase difference need not necessarily be exactly 90° but rather could be between 85° and 95° , for example). Such phase-offset sampling can be used to ensure that, despite the undersampling, the maximum amount of signal information is obtained, and the digital measurement signal is obtained in the form of a two-component signal, i.e., with phase and amplitude information, thus improving the detection of faults. In this case, it is expedient for the two components of the digital measurement signal provided by the A/D converter stage equipped with two A/D converters to be filtered separately using the second filter unit in order to obtain the useful signal in the form of a two-component signal, the two components then being able to be taken into account when evaluating the useful signal.

10026] In order to carry out such phase-offset sampling, it is not necessarily required to use precisely two A/D converters. Instead of this, it would also be possible to use only ~~one~~ a single A/D converter which is sufficiently fast and carries out the two sampling operations, i.e., that at 0° and that at 90° , these two sample values then being processed further separately, as when using two A/D converters, in order to achieve two-component signal evaluation. It would be possible to use very slow A/D converters if, for example, use is made of 4, 8 or 16, etc. A/D converters which do not become active upon each trigger pulse that is applied to the A/D converter stage but rather only become active upon every 2nd, 4th or 8th etc. trigger pulse, i.e., the sampling work for each of the two phase angles is respectively appropriately divided, in terms of time, between a plurality of A/D converters.

10027] The A/D converter stage preferably has a resolution of at least 16 bits, use preferably being made of flash converters or SAR converters.

10028] The application, i.e., the radiation, of the electromagnetic alternating fields to the test specimen using the transmitter may, in principle, be interrupted

at least for part of each interval between two successive trigger signals for the A/D converter stage since signals are not detected, i.e., sampled, anyway in this time (depending on the specific situation, these sampling pauses may, under certain circumstances, extend over a large number of periods of the carrier oscillation). This makes it possible, particularly in the case of portable measuring devices, to considerably save on power consumption, thus making it possible, for example, to considerably reduce the dimensions and weight of the power supply elements. In a similar manner, on the signal detection side, the electronics, i.e., the signal processing processor, in particular, may also be shut down in the interval between two sampling operations in order to save power.

100291 The first filter unit preferably has a low-pass filter which acts as an aliasing filter as regards the sampling by the A/D converter stage, a high-pass filter also preferably being provided in order to remove low-frequency interference signals. The first filter unit is usually in the form of an analog filter. A controllable amplifier is preferably also provided downstream of the first filter unit in order to change the filter signal to the amplitude that is optimally suited to the A/D converter stage.

100301 The speed of the test specimen is preferably determined by means of measurement, for example, using an encoder. If it is not absolutely necessary to measure the testing speed because, for example, it is known anyway with sufficient accuracy at any measurement time, the speed may also be firmly prescribed as a parameter.

100311 A digital signal processor which preferably also forms the second filter unit is preferably used to control the A/D converter stage, i.e., the selection of the trigger times, and to process the digital signal provided by the A/D converter stage. The drive device for triggering the A/D converter stage preferably has a source (which may be formed by a timer) for a binary signal and a divider which is used to divide the binary signal by an integer in order to generate the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage, the binary signal

being processed by a curve shaper in order to provide the supply voltage for the transmitter. The timer may be part of the digital signal processor or may be separate therefrom. The divider is preferably separate from the signal processor and is in the form of a PAL (Programmable Array Logic) module.

~~[0032]~~ The invention will be explained, by way of example, in more detail below with reference to the accompanying drawings, ~~in which:~~

~~fig.~~

Brief Description of the Drawings

~~[0033]~~ Fig. 1 schematically shows the design of one exemplary example of an embodiment of an eddy current measuring apparatus according to the present invention; and

~~fig. [0034]~~ Fig. 2 schematically shows an exemplary one example of the profile of the a probe signal during digital sampling.

Detailed Description of the Invention

~~[0035]~~ Fig. 1 shows one example of the design of an eddy current measuring apparatus according to the invention. In this case, a test specimen 13, which is in the form of an industrial semifinished product, for example, a slab, and is moved linearly past a test station 11 at a variable speed v is tested, the speed being detected by means of a speed sensor 17 which, for example, can emit a signal that is essentially proportional to the speed v . In this case, ~~said the~~ signal may be, for example, a square-wave signal which, for example, contains one pulse for every 5 mm of forward feed of the test specimen 13.

~~[0036]~~ The test station 11 has a transmitter in the form of a transmission coil 12 and a probe in the form of a reception coil 14. The transmission coil 12 is used to induce eddy currents in the test specimen 13 by means of an electromagnetic alternating field at at least one prescribed carrier frequency, ~~said the~~ eddy currents, in turn, inducing, ~~an AC voltage~~ in the reception coil 14, ~~an~~

AC voltage which acts as a probe signal and has a carrier oscillation at the carrier frequency of the transmission coil 12, ~~and the~~. The amplitude and the phase of the probe signal ~~being~~ is modulated as a result of a fault 15 if the fault 15 reaches the effective width WB of the reception coil 14. The reception coil 14 is preferably in the form of a differential coil, that is to say, in the form of a coil which has two windings (which are wound in opposite directions) and reacts only to changes in the electrical properties of the test specimen on account of the presence of a fault 15. Differential coils are suited, in particular, to detecting sudden changes in the test specimen 13. ~~Instead of this, however,~~ However, instead, an absolute coil could also be used as the reception coil 14, ~~said the~~ absolute coil comprising a plurality of windings which are wound in the same direction and being suited, in particular, to detecting long homogeneous changes in the test specimen 13.

[0037] The voltage for the transmission coil 12 may be generated, for example, by a binary signal which is generated by a timer unit 44 being supplied as a predefined frequency to a generator 48 which uses ~~said~~ ~~that~~ frequency to generate a square-wave signal or else a sinusoidal signal which passes through a curve shaper 40 and is then amplified by means of a power amplifier 42 before it is supplied to the transmission coil 12. The signal preferably has a sinusoidal waveform, and, in the simplest case, contains only ~~one a~~ single carrier frequency, ~~but,~~ However, measurements involving a plurality of carrier frequencies at the same time and/or carrier signals which differ considerably from sinusoidal oscillations are also possible, in principle. The carrier frequency is typically in the range from 1 kHz to 5 MHz.

[0038] The probe signal picked up by the reception coil 14 passes through a bandpass filter 18 and an adjustable preamplifier 16 before it is supplied to an A/D converter stage 35. The bandpass filter 18 is used, on the one hand, by means of the low-pass filter, as an ~~(anti)-aliasing~~ anti-aliasing filter as regards the digitization of the signal by the A/D converter stage 35, and is used, on the other hand, by means of the

high-pass filter, to remove low-frequency interference signals. The adjustable preamplifier 16 is used to change the amplitude of the analog probe signal to the amplitude which is optimally suited to the A/D converter stage 35.

100391 The A/D converter stage 35 has two A/D converters 32 and 34 which are connected in parallel and should have a high resolution, but at least a resolution of 16 bits, preferably at least 22 bits, and should preferably be able to carry out at least 500 A/D conversions per second. The A/D converters 32, 34 are preferably in the form of flash converters or SAR (Successive Approximation Register) converters.

100401 The A/D converter stage 35 is triggered by a drive device 37 which has the timer unit 44 (already mentioned), the cosine generator 48, a sine generator 46 which is arranged parallel to the ~~latter sine generator 46~~, and a frequency divider 30. The signal which is generated by the cosine generator 48 and (which is at the frequency of the carrier frequency of the supply signal for the transmission coil 12) and the signal from the sine generator 46 (which signal corresponds to the signal from the cosine generator 48 but has been phase-shifted through 90° with respect to the ~~latter signal from the cosine generator 48~~) are present at the input of the frequency divider 30. In the frequency divider 30, the frequency of these two signals is divided by an integer n .

100411 The corresponding output signal whose frequency has been reduced is used to trigger the A/D converter 32 or the A/D converter 34. The number n for the divider 30 is selected by a digital signal processor 40 as a function of the fault frequency, i.e., the quotient of the instantaneous test specimen speed v and the effective width WB of the reception coil 14. The value of n is preferably selected to be inversely proportional to the fault frequency so that the trigger rate of the A/D converter stage 35 is at least approximately proportional to the fault frequency. In this manner, if the effective width WB is assumed to be constant to a first approximation and if the test specimen speed v is higher, and thus, the fault frequency is higher, the

analog probe signal is correspondingly sampled more frequently.

5 [0042] The divider 30 is preferably in the form of a so-called PAL (Programmable Array Logic) module in order to ensure that the trigger signals arrive at the A/D converter stage 35 in a manner such that they have been delayed as little as possible (i.e., synchronously) with respect to the output signal from the cosine generator 48 and from the sine generator 46 and have no phase jitter.

15 [0043] On account of the corresponding phase shift between the two input signals for the divider 30, the two A/D converters 32, 34 are also triggered with a fixed phase offset of 90° . This makes it possible for the analog probe signal to be evaluated in two components, i.e., both in terms of amplitude and phase. It goes without saying that the phase delay between the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage 35 and the signal from the transmission coil 12 should be as short as possible, in which case so-called phase jitter, in particular, should also be avoided, i.e., the phase relationships should be as precisely constant as possible in terms of time.

30 [0044] The drive device 37 shown is used to ensure that the analog probe signal is sampled at most once per full cycle of the carrier oscillation by each A/D converter 32 and 34 (in this case, n is equal to 1). However, depending on the instantaneous fault frequency, that is to say the test specimen speed v , n may become considerably larger than 1, with the result that only one sampling operation is carried out at all during every n th full cycle of the carrier oscillation.

40 [0045] Fig. 2 shows an example in which n is equal to 2, i.e., each A/D converter 32, 34 carries out one respective sampling operation A_n and B_n only during every second full cycle.

[0046] Since, however, in all cases, sampling is carried out at most once per full cycle for each A/D converter 32, 34, this undersampling results in the frequency of

the carrier oscillation, i.e., the carrier frequency, being eliminated from the digital signal, i.e., undersampling is used to demodulate the analog probe signal.

5

10 100471 The value of n is preferably selected in such a manner that at least 5, preferably at least 20, sampling operations are carried out by each A/D converter 32 and, 34 in the interval of time in which a significant fault signal is observed, that is to say in the interval of time in which a point of the fault 15 moves through the effective width WB of the reception coil 14, that is to say in the interval of time which essentially corresponds to the inverse of the fault frequency, in order to obtain the information contained in the fault signal in a manner which still suffices for reliable fault detection. However, no more than 50, and at most 100, sampling operations will generally be necessary during such an interval of time.

20

25 100481 The frequency of the carrier oscillation should be selected in such a manner that it is at least ten times the fault frequency since the fault signal will otherwise be carried by too few full cycles of the carrier oscillation and the ability to reproduce the fault will become problematical. If, on account of other boundary conditions, the carrier frequency cannot be selected to be high enough, fault detection can be improved by synchronously sampling once in each first half-cycle and in each second half-cycle, the value from the second half-cycle being inverted and then being processed further like the value from the first half-cycle (on account of the inversion, this still constitutes undersampling as regards the carrier frequency).

35

40 100491 The demodulated digital two-channel output signal from the A/D converter stage 35 passes through a digital bandpass filter 52 which can be represented by the signal processor 40 and is used to remove interference signals which are outside the bandwidth of the fault signal. For this purpose, the cut-off frequency of the high-pass filter is preferably selected in such a manner that it is less than one quarter of the fault frequency, while the cut-off

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frequency of the low-pass filter is preferably selected in such a manner that is at least twice the fault frequency in order to avoid removing signal components which still contain information regarding the fault.

5

[0050] The digital bandpass filter 52 is clocked at the sampling rate of the A/D converter stage 35, i.e., the trigger rate, which includes the great advantage that, when the fault frequency is changed, i.e., when the test specimen speed v is changed, the cut-off frequencies of the bandpass filter are automatically entrained with the fault frequency since the cut-off frequencies of a digital bandpass filter are proportional to the clock rate and the clock rate is automatically matched to the change in the fault frequency via the sampling rate which is prescribed by the drive unit 37.

[0051] The information regarding the effective width WB that is needed to determine the fault frequency can be either manually input to the signal processor 40 or it is directly provided by the test station 11, as is described, for example, in EP 0 734 522 B1, and corresponding International Patent Application PCT/EP94/03811 which designates the United States and was published as WO95/169125.

25

[0052] It goes without saying that the measuring system reacts analogously to a change in the fault frequency, said change being caused by the fact that, although the test specimen speed v is kept constant, the reception coil 14 is replaced with another reception coil having a different effective width WB .

30

[0053] The useful signal obtained after filtering by the digital bandpass filter 52 is evaluated in a manner known per se in an evaluation unit 50 in order to detect and locate faults 15 in the test specimen 13, both the amplitude and the phase information for the fault signal usually being used here.

35

[0054] In particular, given relatively large values of n , i.e., if only a relatively small number of full cycles of the carrier oscillation are sampled at all, the transmission coil 12 and/or the evaluation electronics, i.e., the signal processor 40, in particular, can, for

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example, be switched off or put into the quiescent state during the sampling pauses in order to reduce the power consumption, which is important, in particular, for portable measuring devices.

Claims What is claimed is:

- 5 1. A method for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults, particularly by means of eddy currents, in a test specimen (13) which is moved, at a speed (v), relative to a probe (14) that is characterized by an effective width (WB),
- 10 a transmitter (12) being used to apply periodic electromagnetic alternating fields to the test specimen and the probe being used to detect a periodic electrical signal which has a carrier oscillation whose amplitude and/or phase is/are
- 15 modulated as a result of a fault (15) in the test specimen if the fault reaches the effective width of the probe,
- 20 the probe signal being filtered using a frequency-selective first filter unit (18),
- 25 the signal which has been filtered using the first filter unit being sampled by means of a triggerable A/D converter stage (35) in order to obtain a demodulated digital measurement signal,
- 30 the digital measurement signal being filtered using a digital frequency-selective adjustable second filter unit (52) in order to obtain a useful signal, and
- 35 the useful signal being evaluated in order to detect a fault in the test specimen,
- the A/D converter stage being triggered at an nth integer fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation, n being selected as a function of the

5 fault frequency which is obtained as the quotient
 of the relative speed between the test specimen
 and the probe and the effective width of the
 probe, and the frequency-selective second filter
 unit being adjusted as a function of the fault
 frequency.

10 ____2. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized
 in that the relative movement between the test specimen
 (13) and the probe (14) results from the test specimen
 being moved linearly with respect to the probe.

15 ____3. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized
 in that the relative movement between the test specimen
 and the probe results from the probe rotating with
 respect to the test specimen.

20 ____4. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
 claims, characterized in that the transmitter is a coil
 (12) to which a radiofrequency AC voltage in the
 frequency range from 1 kHz to 5 MHz is applied in order
 to induce eddy currents in the test specimen (13), the
 probe being a coil arrangement (14) in which the eddy
 currents induce the periodic signal.

25 ____5. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
 claims, characterized in that the transmitter (12) is
 supplied with an AC voltage in order to generate the
 periodic electromagnetic alternating fields, the AC
30 voltage being generated from a binary signal by curve
 shaping.

35 ____6. The method as claimed in claim 5, characterized
 in that the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage
 (35) is generated by dividing the frequency of the
 binary signal that is used to generate the AC voltage
 for the transmitter (12) by n .

40 ____7. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
 claims, characterized in that n is selected to be
 inversely proportional to the fault frequency in order
 to select the trigger rate of the A/D converter stage

(35) to be at least approximately proportional to the fault frequency.

- 5 8. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
claims, characterized in that n is selected in such a
manner that at least 5, preferably at least 20,
sampling operations are carried out by the A/D
converter stage (35) in an interval of time which
corresponds to the inverse of the fault frequency.
- 10 9. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
claims, characterized in that n is selected in such a
manner that at most 100, preferably at most 50,
sampling operations are carried out by the A/D
15 converter stage (35) in an interval of time which
corresponds to the inverse of the fault frequency.
- 20 10. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
claims, characterized in that the frequency-selective
second filter unit (52) is automatically adjusted as a
function of the fault frequency by the second filter
unit being clocked at the sampling rate of the A/D
converter stage (35).
- 25 11. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
claims, characterized in that the second filter unit
(52) has a low-pass filter in order to remove
interference components of the demodulated digital
signal at frequencies higher than the fault frequency,
30 the cut-off frequency of the low-pass filter being
higher than the fault frequency, preferably higher than
twice the fault frequency.
- 35 12. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
claims, characterized in that the second filter unit
(52) has a high-pass filter in order to remove DC
components of the demodulated digital signal, the cut-
off frequency of the high-pass filter being less than
40 the fault frequency, preferably less than a quarter of
the fault frequency.
- 45 13. The method as claimed in one of the preceding
claims, characterized in that the frequency of the
carrier oscillation is selected in such a manner that
it is at least ten times the fault frequency.

5 14. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that, when it is triggered, the A/D converter stage (35) samples two values, in a manner offset by a fixed phase difference, in order to obtain the digital measurement signal in the form of a two-component signal.

10 15. The method as claimed in claim 14, characterized in that the phase difference is 90° or $m * 360^\circ + 90^\circ$, where m is an integer.

15 16. The method as claimed in claim 14 or 15, characterized in that the two components of the digital measurement signal which is provided by the A/D converter stage (35) are filtered separately using the second filter unit (52) in order to obtain the useful signal in the form of a two-component signal.

20 17. The method as claimed in claim 16, characterized in that the two components are taken into account when evaluating the useful signal.

25 18. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the application of the electromagnetic alternating fields to the test specimen (13) using the transmitter (12) is interrupted at least for part of each interval between two successive trigger signals for the A/D converter stage (35).

30 19. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the first filter unit (18) has at least one low-pass filter which acts as an aliasing filter as regards the sampling by the A/D converter stage (35).

35 20. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the first filter unit (18) has a high-pass filter in order to remove low-frequency interference signals.

40 21. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that the speed (v) of the test specimen (13) is determined by means of measurement or is firmly prescribed as a parameter.

45

5 22. The method as claimed in one of the preceding claims, characterized in that a controllable amplifier (16) is connected upstream of the A/D converter stage (35) in order to change the signal to the amplitude which is optimally suited to the A/D converter stage.

10 23. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the transmitter uses electromagnetic excitation to generate sound waves in the test specimen, and the probe detects sound waves in the test specimen and converts them into the periodic electrical signal.

15 24. The method as claimed in claim 1, characterized in that the transmitter radiates microwaves into the test specimen, and the probe converts microwaves into the periodic electrical signal.

20 25. An apparatus for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults (15), particularly by means of eddy currents, in a test specimen (13) which is moved, at a speed (v), relative to a probe (14) that is characterized by an effective width (WE), said apparatus having

30 a device (17) for detecting the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe,

 a transmitter (12) for applying periodic electromagnetic alternating fields to the test specimen,

35 the probe for detecting a periodic electrical signal which has a carrier oscillation whose amplitude and/or phase is/are modulated as a result of a fault in the test specimen if the fault reaches the effective width of the probe,

40

a frequency-selective first filter unit (18) for filtering the probe signal,

5 a triggerable A/D converter stage (35) for sampling the signal which has been filtered using the first filter unit in order to obtain a demodulated digital measurement signal,

10 a drive device (37) for triggering the A/D converter stage at an n th integer fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation, n being selected as a function of the fault frequency which is obtained as the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and
15 the effective width of the probe,

a digital frequency-selective second filter unit (52) which can be adjusted as a function of the fault frequency and is intended to filter the
20 digital measurement signal for the purpose of obtaining a useful signal, and

an evaluation unit (50) for evaluating the useful signal for the purpose of detecting a fault in the
25 test specimen.

____26. The apparatus as claimed in claim 25, characterized in that the probe (14) is in the form of a differential coil or an absolute coil for measuring
30 eddy currents.

____27. The apparatus as claimed in either of claims 25 and 26, characterized in that a binary signal source (44, 48) and a curve shaper (40) are provided in order
35 to generate a supply voltage signal for the transmitter (12) from a binary signal by means of curve shaping.

5 28. The apparatus as claimed in claim 27, characterized in that the drive device (37) has a divider (30) in order to generate the trigger signal for the A/D converter stage (35) from the binary signal for the curve shaper (40) by dividing said binary signal by n.

10 29. The apparatus as claimed in claim 28, characterized in that the binary signal source is in the form of a timer (44).

15 30. The apparatus as claimed in one of claims 25 to 29, characterized in that the A/D converter stage (35) has a resolution of at least 16 bits.

 31. The apparatus as claimed in one of claims 25 to 30, characterized in that the A/D converter stage (35) has at least one flash converter or SAR converter.

20 32. The apparatus as claimed in one of claims 25 to 31, characterized in that the second filter unit (52) is formed by a digital signal processor (40).

25 33. The apparatus as claimed in one of claims 25 to 32, characterized in that the A/D converter stage (35) has two A/D converters (32, 34) which are connected in parallel, the two A/D converters being triggered at the same frequency in such a manner that they sample in a manner offset by a fixed phase difference in order to obtain the digital measurement
30 signal in the form of a two-component signal.

Abstract

~~The invention relates to a method~~ Method for the nondestructive and contact-free detection of faults in a test specimen (13) which is moved, ~~at a speed (v),~~ relative to a probe (14) that is characterized by an effective width (WB), ~~the probe being used to detect~~ detects a periodic electrical signal which ~~has~~ having a carrier oscillation whose amplitude and/or phase is/are modulated by ~~a any~~ fault (15) in the test specimen, ~~the~~ The probe signal ~~being is~~ filtered and being sampled by means of a triggerable A/D converter stage (35) ~~in order to obtain a demodulated digital measurement signal which is filtered using a digital frequency-selective adjustable second filter unit (52) in order to obtain a useful signal which is evaluated in order to detect a fault in the test specimen, the~~ The A/D converter stage ~~being is~~ triggered at an ~~nth integer~~ a fraction of the frequency of the carrier oscillation, ~~a~~ being selected as a function of the fault frequency which is obtained as the quotient of the relative speed between the test specimen and the probe and the effective width of the probe, and the frequency-selective second filter unit ~~being is~~ adjusted as a function of the fault frequency.

~~(Fig. 1)~~